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The Moundbuilders: Ancient Peoples of Eastern North America

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Book Reviews and Notices

The Moundbuilders: Ancient Peoples of Eastern North America, by George R. Milner. New York: Thames & Hudson, 2004. 224 pp. Illustrations, maps, graphs, tables, notes, bibliography, index. \$39.95 cloth, \$22.50 paper.

Reviewer William Green is director of the Logan Museum of Anthropology at Beloit College. He was the State Archaeologist of Iowa from 1988 to 2001.

Thousands of ancient mounds once existed in eastern North America. Many Americans believed that a non-Indian people—"The Moundbuilders"—built them. Authorship of the mounds finally became clear at the end of the nineteenth century: the moundbuilders were Indians. Since then, archaeologists have used the term *moundbuilders* to refer to Indians who built mounds rather than to "advanced" and vanished non-Indian civilizations.

In *The Moundbuilders*, archaeologist George Milner presents a welcome summary and synthesis of knowledge about Indians who built mounds. As the only surviving above-ground structures from pre-contact times, mounds serve as useful starting points for discussing the pre-contact history of native peoples. Milner covers the practices associated with moundbuilding as well as a wide array of other topics: technology, subsistence, health, social and political organization, and intergroup relationships. He stresses population size and density and demographic changes over time.

Milner does not limit his coverage to the people who built mounds. He also discusses their Paleoindian and Archaic predecessors. Archaic people started building mounds about 5,400 years ago in what is now northeastern Louisiana. They may have gathered periodically rather than settled permanently, building large mound complexes a little at a time. They also developed regional exchange networks, reflected in numerous ornaments and tools made of non-local material.

Moundbuilding began later in the Midwest. Beginning about 2,500 years ago, Woodland Indians constructed large mounds covering tombs with multiple burials and offerings. Some mounds covered special-purpose structures. In Ohio, mound sites often featured large, geometric earthworks. Milner presents information and photos from many excavations illustrating those features. He mentions some recent findings as well: Woodland moundbuilders used sod blocks rather than haphazard basketloads of dirt; supposed clay caps often are actually natural

soil horizons that developed within mounds; and subsurface traces still exist of earthworks that had been flattened by plowing.

Moundbuilding continued in the Late Woodland period, about 1,600–1,100 years ago, a time often ignored in North American archaeology. Mounds in that period were small and relatively simple, but distinctive animal-shaped (“effigy”) mounds were built in the upper Mississippi Valley. Many Late Woodland groups were more sedentary, lived in larger villages, and engaged in more intensive plant food production than their predecessors, but patterns varied regionally.

Population growth and higher densities gave rise to chiefdoms—hierarchically organized polities—after about 1000 C.E. in locales that were rich in natural resources. Many chiefdoms were agriculturally based societies in which mounds served as platforms for temples, elite residences, and public buildings, as well as repositories for interments. Populations of chiefdoms were large—in the thousands for Cahokia, the largest mound center, but not, in Milner’s estimation, in the tens of thousands as others suggest. Chiefs—lineage heads to whom people became indebted—acquired and accumulated exotic goods, waged war, built defenses, and oversaw moundbuilding. Milner doubts that there was craft specialization or a market economy. Worsening climate exacerbated unstable social situations in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and Milner attributes the pre-contact dissolution of midwestern chiefdoms to the “interaction of both natural and social forces” (168).

Few chiefdoms but many villages and tribes populated the upper Mississippi Valley, Great Lakes, and Northeast after 1000 C.E. Some groups, such as the Oneota people of Iowa and surrounding states, built mounds for burial, not as expressions of status differences.

Milner’s coverage is heavily weighted toward the Midwest and the Greater Southeast (Georgia to Oklahoma). Despite the subtitle, the book contains little discussion of other parts of eastern North America. Iowa archaeology is not mentioned except to note that visitors can see mounds at Toolesboro (amusingly misspelled “Tootlesboro”) and at Effigy Mounds National Monument.

Skillfully presenting knowledge gained by careful excavation and scientific study of mounds and related sites, *The Moundbuilders* comes closer than other recent works to providing a comprehensive, non-technical archaeological overview of the Midwest and Southeast. It covers several pre-contact cultures closely related to those that existed in Iowa, complementing Lynn Alex’s excellent *Iowa’s Archaeological Past*. Milner’s use of analogies drawn from ethnographic studies and ethnohistoric records humanizes the text, and the book’s numerous illustrations aid the general reader’s comprehension.

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